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The U.S. made the right moves

By David S. Broder

As the end nears for the odious rule of Ferdinand Marcos, the greatest praise deservedly goes to the people of the Philippines, who have demonstrated such a strong desire for freedom and democracy that even Marcos has to understand that he has played out the string on his 20-year dynasty.

But let it be said that in this important instance, the government of the United States, with bipartisan cooperation among key members of Congress and the administration, and support of the uniformed military and the intelligence agencies, have delivered a unified message of support for the Filipino people that has helped move a reluctant and recalcitrant Marcos toward his inevitable exit.

In a significant test in a vital part of the world, the United States did manage effectively to exert its influence on behalf of both our ideals and our national interests. That is important enough — and rare enough — that it is worth examining how it came to be.

One key was that major decision-makers in both Congress and the administration had firsthand knowledge of the Philippines that they were able to update regularly. There were no travel or language barriers to overcome. That meant that policy-makers were less reliant on self-proclaimed (and often quarrelsome) experts. It also meant they were less prone to impose on the Philippine reality preconceived notions formed from other and irrelevant experiences.

In both these respects, there were advantages over our dealings with Vietnam or, currently, with Nicaragua and Central America. We knew the history and we knew the language and culture of the Philippines as we did not in these other Third World countries where we have intervened.

Another advantage was that, in this instance, unlike the Middle East, there was no powerful domestic constituency group skewing the outcome of the policy debate. Filipino-Americans form a much less influential voting bloc than Jewish-Americans, and therefore the administration and (especially) Congress were able to evaluate policy choices in a relatively pressure-free atmosphere.

Third, leaders of both branches of government found it possible not just to balance but to merge our idealistic and practical interests. The two giant U.S. bases represent our biggest concrete interest in the Philippines, but our historical association with the Filipinos, bridging colonial days, World War II battles and liberation, gave us an unusually clear commitment to the freedom and democracy of the islands.

Liberals in Congress instinctively opposed Marcos' tendency to autocratic rule. What was significant and crucial was that conservatives in both Congress and the Reagan administration understood that preservation of American bases and interests were also threatened by his heavy-handedness. So the smart hawks and the realistic doves both found reasons to oppose Marcos' regime.

Special praise should go to the uniformed military in the United States and to the Central Intelligence Agency, which in this instance, rejected the temptation to cut their private deals with their Filipino counterparts, to the detriment of American policy. They were part of the consensus and helped move policy forward.

Finally, the media coverage of events in the Philippines, from Benigno Aquino's murder in 1983 to Marcos' blatant theft of this month's election, made it very clear to the American people what was at stake. Those government officials who complain that the press and television sensationalize situations or undercut American policy cannot make that charge in the Philippines.

The execution of the agreed policy was not perfect, but it was a darn sight more consistent and effective than it has been in other areas of the world under this administration. Except for some verbal wanderings by President Reagan in his press-conference comments (quickly corrected by his associates), the administration officials, senators and representatives of both parties who shared responsibility for our policy exerted steady and growing pressure on Marcos to shape up or ship out.

Looking back over the record of the last 18 months, one can see a persistent and increasingly focused campaign to reform the Marcos regime — or remove it.

Don Oberdorfer of the Washington Post has cited a November 1984 National Security Council paper which laid down what proved to be the correct policy line. It said: "Reforms are likely in the short run to weaken some bases of support for the current government, which will resist many of them. While President Marcos at this stage is part of the problem, he is also necessarily part of the solution. We need to be able to work with him and to try to influence him through a well-orchestrated policy of incentives and disincentives to set the stage for peaceful and eventual transition to a successor government whenever that takes place. Marcos, for his part, will try to remain in power indefinitely."

The authors of that policy and their allies in both parties on Capitol Hill deserve thanks for providing an altogether too rare demonstration of consistency and coordination in the development and execution of foreign policy.

It is no easy thing for a great power to divorce itself from and then rid itself of a client-government leader who has outlived his usefulness and overreached his power. The United States has done that with Marcos — and a good thing, too.

(David S. Broder, based at the Washington Post, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1973.)